

Political persuasion

Getting past partisan politics to achieve postal prosperity

Rich Byington is a city letter carrier with the U.S. Postal Service who has carried mail for 18 years; a member of Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 right from the start. For the last 17 of those years, he has worked out of a Buffalo post office located a short distance from the mile-long Peace Bridge that crosses Lake Erie and connects the United States with Canada.

Byington, the product of a union household growing up, began serving his fellow letter carriers almost immediately as a shop steward. And in more recent years, he has achieved great success as Branch 3's coordinator for the Letter Carrier Political Fund, NALC's political action committee (PAC).

He also is a card-carrying member of the Republican Party.

"Regardless of your ideology or political persuasion," he said, "you have to look around you and ask: Can any of my brothers or sisters afford not to have a job? Could you live with yourself if they lost their job?"

"I vote with my mind," he said. Democrat, Independent or Republican, "we're all in the same fight."

NALC President Fredric Rolando agreed. "The political diversity within our union gives us an advantage," he said. "As I said in July at our rap session in Houston and as I stress time and again at every opportunity, our union's membership mirrors America.

"And there is nothing partisan about our Postal Service—an institution with roots in the U.S. Constitution," Rolando said.

The modern reality is that voluntary monetary contributions to political candidates who support our causes and concerns often are crucial. Individuals can give directly to candidates, to political parties or to PACs—for example, the Letter Carrier Political Fund.

The Political Fund is a non-partisan effort concerned with helping elect candidates, regardless of party affiliation, who support letter carriers. The fund solicits non-dues donations from NALC members and then uses that money to support candidates' campaigns for election (or re-election), to boost get-out-the-vote drives and to help pay for the release of NALC members to work on various labor-to-labor efforts.

Byington might disagree with his fellow members on issues such as welfare or gun control, but whether he is trying to get new members to sign up in support of the Political Fund, or whether he's urging those who already

give to dig a little deeper, his message to all members is the same.

"I tell them the truth," Byington said. "I tell them the importance of giving something, because our jobs are controlled by Congress."

The letter carrier grew up in a union household—his mother was a public school teacher, his father a member of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union.

"I was always interested in politics," Byington said, "and I worked on some political campaigns in college." Before he graduated, he took and passed the letter carrier exam. At first, he accepted a good-paying job in the private sector, but when the Postal Service offered him a position, choosing to make the switch was a no-brainer. "The benefits of being a letter carrier were better," he said.

As Branch 3's Political Fund coordinator, Byington has relied on this passion for politics to help his fellow letter carriers make crucial decisions about giving to the fund.

"Our jobs are controlled by Congress," he said, "so I try to convince them about the need to have the right friends in Congress."

Branch 3 is one of the larger locals in the NALC with nearly 2,000 members, and Byington estimated that about 97 percent of the letter carriers under the branch's jurisdiction are NALC members. Of the approximately 200 people who show up at monthly branch meetings, he said perhaps between 70 and 80 percent give to the PAC.

Byington emphasized the importance of making sure branch officers lead by example, and he recommended that Political Fund coordinators start at the top of their own locals and work their

Rich Byington





way down. “I went after every officer and steward—and I still do,” he said.

But it’s persistence with all levels of membership, Byington said, that is key to a successful Political Fund campaign. “It’s a tough fight,” he admitted. “You’ve really got to be patient.”

He advised his fellow PAC coordinators to keep at it. “Wherever you see members meet, make giving to it as easy as you possibly can.

“I go to every event,” Byington said: “MDA fundraisers, the volleyball tournament, brewery bust, bowling—you name it.”

He said he often starts by getting in touch with the newest NALC members fresh from the Carrier Academy. “I go after the low-hanging fruit,” he said, “and pick it first.”

The 2013 Das arbitration award that finalized the NALC’s current contract with the Postal Service also created the city carrier assistant (CCA) position, and Byington said that getting CCAs to give to the PAC was a “tough nut to crack” at first. But with persistence and patience, Political Fund contributions from CCAs in his branch have started to flow in, he said.

In his own station, almost everyone gives by automatic deduction, although some still give to the PAC once a year by writing a check.

“We have some pretty good fighters,” he said, “but there will always be a segment you will never get to,” Byington said: “the ones who don’t go to branch functions or don’t read newspapers.”

He related a story about a particularly frustrating phone campaign to gain new PAC members. “We must have called nearly 250 people,” he said, “but it only netted maybe 10 new contributors.”

But setbacks such as those are no reason to get discouraged. “If everyone

gave just a dollar more, we’d see a significant increase,” he said. “But I want to get our numbers higher before going back and asking for more.

“We’ve got to keep the Postal Service from going broke or self-destructing,” he said. “Do that, and we all benefit.”

All for one

Rolando noted that the bonds between the Democratic Party and organized labor once were seen as unshakeable. But those bonds have frayed somewhat, and they are now open to question.

“For the last few years, Republicans have held the majority in the House of Representatives,” he said. “It’s sometimes been a fight, but the House, over and over again, has approved the decades-old appropriations language that mandates delivery of the mail at least six days a week, and it appears poised to do so again this year.”

The president pointed out that Republican Rep. Sam Graves of Missouri lost no time in January in again introducing a House resolution that calls on USPS to ensure continuation of six-day delivery. As this magazine went to press, 212 House members from both parties had signed on to Graves’ H.Res. 12. Meanwhile, there were 198 co-sponsors from both parties on West Virginia Republican David McKinley’s H.Res. 54, a measure calling for restoration of USPS’ July 2012 service standards.

“Letter carriers have many friends on both sides of the aisle,” Rolando said, “and it’s crucial that we work together to ensure we strengthen that support.

“Even so, not every member feels comfortable giving to our PAC—or any

PAC—for a variety of reasons,” he said. “We also realize that there are many Republican NALC members, just like Rich, who nevertheless understand that their livelihoods are stake.

“So the job of the Letter Carrier Political Fund is to educate all of our members, regardless of their political persuasion,” the president said, “to help them realize that a strong and growing political fund, combined with a thriving and effective grassroots political network, will provide all letter carriers a fighting chance to achieve legislative success.”

Only NALC members can contribute to the Letter Carrier Political Fund, and federal law strictly prohibits the use of union dues for political purposes. Visit nalc.org/pac to find out how you can get involved with the Letter Carrier Political Fund. **PR**

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